

T I M E S H A V E C H A N G E D !

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An address to the BPW Canada
Convention, June 19, 2010
Horseshoe Valley, Ontario

BPW Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen... Wouldn't it be interesting if, on this 100th anniversary of BPW Toronto, the speaker could be a founding member? I wonder what she would think of us. Toronto President Mina must have been thinking of the old adage, "A half a loaf is better than none", when she asked me to speak, because I have been a member for only half the lifetime of the Club. At the age of eighty-four, I still have all my marbles--or most of them, I think--so I can recall many of the Club's interests and activities in the past five decades.

But first, let us try to imagine what participation in the paid labour force was like for women in 1910. The proportion of women who worked outside the home was only a fraction of what it is today. And they were unmarried women. A married woman's place was in the home. The vast majority of gainfully employed women worked in a narrow range of occupations, mostly factory work, retail sales or office clerical tasks. The term "glass ceiling" had not yet been coined but it was firmly in place, just barely above the heads of those in entry-level positions. Men were expected to gradually rise in their employment status: women were expected to work for just a few years before marriage and never return to the workplace. And that is what most of them did!

The few who were still going out to work at the age of thirty were not called "career women". The term "old maid" was applied with a mixture of derision and pity. Girls did not aspire to be old maids. By the time she entered her teens, a girl would have a hope chest. It could be an actual chest but it was more likely to be the bottom drawer of a dresser or a shelf in a back cupboard. There she gradually accumulated the hand-embroidered tea towels, table-cloths and pillow cases for her future home. Among the cross-stitched flowers would be a blank area where, upon engagement, the young woman would embroider her future husband's initial. Upon marriage, in 1910, a woman dropped her own name and adopted that of her husband. And it was the husband's name only that was passed on to the children born of the union.

As an aside, I mention that, a hundred years later, this is still what many brides do. When I married fifty-eight years ago and kept my maiden name of Ellis, my friends and family were shocked. They did not think it was legal to do that. It was, and still is! This

is exemplified by my daughter who has not only retained her own surname but has given her three children a hyphenated union of their father's and mother's names.

But let us return to 1910. It was around that time that my mother and my aunts were leaving school in Toronto. Their experiences were typical of those of other girls. My father's family was middle class as my grandfather owned a small wholesale jewellery company. There were four sons and one daughter. One after the other, my father's brothers left school at the age of fourteen (the school-leaving age at the time) and went to work in the family company. The daughter also left school but never worked, although she did not marry until her late twenties. With a father and brothers employed, she was not expected to contribute to the family income.

The financial situation was quite different in my mother's working-class family. My grandfather died very young leaving three boys and three girls. They all left school as soon as it was legally possible and, boys and girls alike, found jobs. My mother worked for the telephone company as an operator. In those days, all calls (even local ones) required the services of an operator. So, for the years between school and marriage, she held this white-collar, but dead-end job. One of her sisters was a salesgirl at Eaton's Department Store and the other was a copy typist in an office. All lived at home until marriage as respectable young women were expected to do and none ever went out to work after marriage.

Of course, there have always been some married women who had to earn money out of economic necessity. Their lot was especially difficult with most employers refusing to hire them. Often, their only option was an extension of household duties like taking in a boarder, doing dressmaking for neighbours or cleaning the homes of the well-to-do. Whether married or single, few working women had anything that could be called "a career".

This was the social climate in 1910. And yet a group of brave and ambitious working women in Toronto founded a club to improve the conditions of women in the workforce. When we think of them, it is with a mixture of awe and gratitude. They had never heard of "equal pay for equal work", "pensions for women" or "maternity leave" but they laid the foundation upon which members of BPW Toronto have been building for a hundred years!

Before long, similar groups of women started clubs in other areas and, in due course, there were provincial, national and international organizations of business and professional women working towards common goals. Members of BPW Toronto have always joined hands with other clubs. When there were several BPW clubs in different parts of Metropolitan Toronto--North Toronto, Toronto East, etc.--the presidents used to meet regularly to arrange joint

club meetings or to work together on resolutions for upcoming provincial conferences or national conventions.

Toronto Club has always been proud of members who took on responsibilities in the larger networks of business and professional women. In the list of past presidents of BPW Ontario, you can find Toronto members like Janet Follett, Marg Ashdown and Liz Neville. No fewer than six Toronto members have served as president of BPW Canada, including Elsie MacGill, Margaret Jackson and Doris Guyatt. We have always been especially proud of being the first BPW Club in the world to have provided two international presidents, Margaret Hyndman and Nazla Dane, truly great women and an inspiration to us all. In 1956, provincial, national and international BPW presidents were all members of Toronto Club; namely, Elsie MacGill, Maudie Baylay and Margaret Hyndman.

During its century of achievement, there have been many presidents of BPW Toronto, each with her own set of priorities and style of leadership. Each contributed something unique and we are grateful for their commitment. There are eight past presidents here tonight: Valerie Clarke, Mina DiDomenico, Dormer Ellis, Olga Gill, Henrietta Green, Liz Neville, Patricia Prez and Jennie Wdowiak who is also our current president. Will all past presidents of BPW Toronto please stand. Thank you, Sisters.

It was due to a chance encounter on a Toronto bus that I became a BPW member over fifty years ago. In the 1950's, I was a professor of electrical technology at what is now called Ryerson University. At that time, its name was Ryerson Institute of Technology. I was the first and only woman in any of the engineering technology departments. Although I taught there for five years, I never had a female student in any of my classes. Of course, there were co-eds at Ryerson, but they were in the departments of secretarial science, home economics and fashion design. I spent my days in an entirely male environment. When a stranger I happened to be chatting with on a TTC bus told me about a group of working women meeting for dinner at the Royal York Hotel once a month, I decided to drop in. It would make a nice change, I thought, and, as they were working women, I would not be subjected to the usual criticism for not being a housewife. I really thought it was just a social group. I didn't know they had any mission.

There were about fifty women in attendance, sitting at tables for eight. I felt immediately "at home" among them and got to know my tablemates over dinner. One was a lawyer and another a pharmacist. I had never met a woman lawyer before and I didn't even know that there were any women pharmacists. I was very pleased to meet them and everyone was friendly. No one seemed to think I must be a weirdo because I was an engineer. They already had a member who was an engineer and everyone loved Elsie. What did amaze my tablemates was the fact that I had a baby which I had produced without ever leaving the workforce. They thought this

accomplishment so remarkable that they insisted I go to the microphone at the head table and tell everyone how I had done it.

Nowadays, you are not surprised if the woman checking out your groceries at the supermarket or the woman teller at your neighbourhood bank is obviously pregnant. If you see her regularly, you may even enquire when her baby is due or if it is her first. But, in the 1950's when married women were seldom employed outside the home, there were no pregnant women in the working world. An obviously expectant mother kept out of sight. She might go for a walk with her husband after dark, but she did not parade around in the daytime in front of strangers. It would not have been "decent". I fully expected to be fired as soon as my pregnancy became noticeable. My students did not want a change of professor in mid-term so they pleaded with the principal to let me stay. He said the government would never agree but he would try. Ryerson employees were Ontario civil servants at that time. The principal requested permission for me to continue teaching "until a qualified replacement could be found". He cited the facts that all the students were over 18 years of age and that I taught only single-sex classes. The government official who dealt with my case must have assumed that I taught in home economics or some other all-female department and the principal was informed that I could continue on staff "at his discretion".

I continued lecturing to all-male classes to the end of the academic term. Term ended on a Friday afternoon with a week of exams to follow. I went into labour on the Saturday and my baby was born in Women's College Hospital on Sunday. Of course, I was not available to supervise examinations the following week but my colleagues invigilated for me and brought the examination papers to the maternity ward where I marked them. The nurses thought it was a strange activity for a new mother. I remember one of them looking at an exam paper full of vector diagrams and electrical circuits and asking incredulously, "Do you really know what all that stuff means?" I assured her that I did. After the usual six days in hospital, I returned home with my healthy, nine-pound daughter. The next day, I was back at Ryerson for staff meetings. There was no such thing as "maternity leave" in 1958. The term did not even exist. The Nana, a grandmotherly woman we had engaged, took over nursery duties whenever I was not at home. The baby was thriving. Toronto BPW members were delighted by this unusual story and welcomed me into the sisterhood.

My students were pleased that I had not abandoned them. Even the principal was happy until the student newspaper, The Ryersonian, published a picture of me holding my infant daughter with the caption, "Miss Ellis has a baby!" What a scandal! He insisted that the next issue include a front page clarification to the effect that Miss Ellis had been married for six years and did, in fact, have a husband. The students thought the principal's reaction amusing because they knew my husband who taught part-time at

Ryerson.

The principal's concern was understandable. Fifty years ago, there was nothing funny about being an unmarried mother. There were no "single moms" living on financial assistance from the government. There were only "fallen women" and their "bastards". Very few single mothers could afford to keep their babies and those who did faced the constant humiliation of their child being taunted or shunned by other children. This is one aspect of society that has become more humane over the years. Nowadays, a few single women choose to become mothers through artificial insemination by a sperm donor. A half-century ago, this would have been unthinkable.

As mentioned earlier, I arranged to keep my own surname upon marriage. I never used my husband's name or adopted the title of Mrs. My mother was Mrs. Ellis. I continued to be Miss Ellis. There was no Ms. in those days. My daughter was ten years old before I earned a doctoral degree and became Dr. Ellis. "Dr." is a very convenient title as it reveals neither marital status nor gender, the latter being particularly useful to me in my career in a non-traditional field.

Men have always had an advantage in that the title of Mister gives no indication of marital status. Women were at a great disadvantage, especially when they sought remunerative employment, because they had to be either Miss or Mrs. Until recently, women were defined by their marital status. Even BPW reflected social norms. For many decades, BPW Toronto produced an annual roster of its current members. The booklet always included a page listing Past Presidents in chronological order. In these lists, for the first seventy years, each president is identified as Miss or Mrs. The vast majority had the title "Miss" as would be expected from the scarcity of employed married women in the earlier decades. The first president to be listed without a title was Elizabeth Neville. All the Toronto presidents that followed her also have no indication of marital status. I suppose we could have started using Ms. but it would have been redundant as a BPW president is obviously female. The BPW Toronto Past Presidents who stood a few minutes ago include single women, married women, mothers and grandmothers. They were all good presidents, so marital status really didn't matter.

If you were to ask each one of them to name something important that Toronto Club has accomplished, you would likely get a wide variety of responses, depending on personal perspectives and period of membership. Personally, I would cite the so-called Arts of Management courses given in the 1960's. Mention has already been made of the very low glass ceiling that used to block women's promotion. I noticed this in my very first part-time job. At

the age of 16, I worked as a salesgirl at Woolworths, the five-and-ten-cent store in downtown Toronto. One had to be good at mental arithmetic as we had no cash registers, just cash drawers. The staff consisted of a middle-aged manager who ordered stock and set prices, twelve "salesgirls" of whom I was the only one still a "girl", and the assistant manager who was our boss. He was in his early twenties. He called the salesgirls by their first names but he was Mister Taylor and had to be addressed as "Sir". We were all scared of him. He would come up to a salesgirl unexpectedly and demand, "How much is the ribbon?" "Three yards for a dime, Sir" would be the meek response. "If a customer wants four yards, how much change do you give from a quarter?" "Mmm" he would say as he walked away, leaving the poor salesgirl wondering if she had given the right reply. We suspected that he did not know the right answer but no one dared challenge him. Even at the age of 16, I felt that the most experienced salesgirl should have been the boss, not this inexperienced young man with the big ego.

Twenty years later, as a member of BPW Toronto, I was on the committee that ran a programme to help women get the necessary training for promotion. At that time, most management courses were "in house" with promising male employees being invited to participate during working hours. Women had no access to this type of training and so no opportunity for promotion. The BPW Arts of Management courses were designed for women and given outside of business hours. They gave participants credentials and confidence and were very popular with both BPW members and non-members. Courses were given until the need declined. Education for administrative positions gradually moved into the public sector, particularly the universities. Today, a Master's degree in Business Administration, the M.B.A., is a very saleable degree. An increasing proportion of the graduates are women--including one of my nieces. She holds a responsible position in a financial institution and, thanks to a couple of paid maternity leaves, has also raised two fine children. Her grandmother and great aunts, whom ~~you will recall spent their pre-marriage years as telephone operator,~~ salesgirl and typist, could never have imagined having a rewarding career combined with motherhood. Times have indeed changed!

Another BPW initiative that stands out in my memory is a series of Career Information Sessions for high school girls. Modern schools have guidance counsellors and organized career days with a wealth of information available. It has not always been so! In the early 1940's, I attended Danforth Technical School in Toronto. Most of the programmes were four years long and designed to lead directly into employment. However, there was a so-called academic stream, five years in length, as preparation for university studies. We followed the same curriculum as the collegiates except we did not study Latin. Instead, we had one practical subject each year. The boys had an annual choice of woodworking, machine shop, auto mechanics, electricity, draughting, etc. The few girls in the

academic stream had no choice. In successive years, we were to take cooking, dressmaking, home nursing, and millinery. In the fourth year, I had the audacity to ask the homeroom teacher if I could take draughting instead of millinery. He was so shocked that he sent me to see the principal. The principal told me in no uncertain terms that the school "had no facilities for teaching draughting to a girl" and then added in a more fatherly tone that it was an advantage to a young woman to be able to make her own hats. So I took millinery at school and learned draughting from my father at home.

Near the end of our final year, two people came from the University of Toronto to tell us about university studies--a man to speak to the boys about the various branches of engineering and a woman to tell the girls about the Home Economics course. Having already decided to study engineering, I asked politely if I could attend that session. The teacher ridiculed me in front of the class, assuming that I just wanted to "chase after the boys" and sent me off with the other girls. So I heard the lecture on home economics but I still enrolled in engineering the following September! Four years later, as I was nearing the end of my engineering course, there was a request for volunteers to speak to high school seniors about university courses in engineering. Guess who volunteered to speak at Danforth Technical School. The same sexist teacher was still in charge and had to introduce me as the representative from the engineering faculty at the University of Toronto. It is said that revenge is sweet. It is!

Perhaps it was because of my own high school experiences that the first committee I volunteered for when I joined BPW Toronto years later was the Career Information Committee. Its aim was to widen the career aspirations of girls by providing them with information and role models. They still got neither at school. On Friday afternoons, from four to six, we held Career Sessions in a university building. Almost all the speakers were Toronto Club members as we had in our midst, not only women who had succeeded in typically feminine professions like nursing and elementary-school teaching, but also an accountant, a real estate saleswoman, a pharmacist, a lawyer, and even an aeronautical engineer. Each explained the work she did, the academic preparation, the remuneration and the opportunities for advancement. The sessions were very informal and, in the absence of boys, the participants felt free to ask anything they wanted, even personal questions about what it was like to be a career woman. Our message was a simple one. "You can be anything you want to be. If a job does not require brute strength or the ability to grow a beard, you can do it as well as any man. Maybe, even better!" The career session initiative of BPW Toronto continued for several years until guidance counsellors became common in Toronto secondary school.

The Arts of Management courses for ambitious women in business and the Career Information Sessions for high school girls are just examples of the many successful undertakings of BPW Toronto at various times in its long history. Each addressed a current injustice and improved opportunities for women.

On this, the one hundredth anniversary of BPW Toronto, we can certainly say, "Well done, BPW Toronto!" And each of us, as a member of BPW Canada can vow to continue the good work initiated by a small group of far-sighted working women in Toronto, a century ago.

Thank you.

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